

VZCZCXRO6896
OO RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #0470/01 1151207
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 241207Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6659
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8406
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2134
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9642
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0607
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1256
RHHMUNS/COMSOPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000470

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

USAID FOR ANNE DIX

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2018
TAGS: [AID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: DISTINCT IDENTITY OF CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS
THREATENED BY BENGALI MIGRATION

REF: DHAKA 0292

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A visit to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southeastern Bangladesh by EmbOffs in mid-April found the tribal people who a half-century ago accounted for a vast majority of the population are no longer masters of their land. Bengali migrants dominate cities and commerce, and they continue to push indigenous people off their land with the backing of the military. Soldiers are omnipresent. Tribal people are kept off the police force and are barely represented in the top echelons of government. The king of the largest tribal group, who currently is a high-level official in the Caretaker Government, suggests at least some comparisons with the more widely publicized Han Chinese domination of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China are apt. Ethnic tension in the Hill Tracts helps explain the continued activity of small insurgent groups and what some see as the inevitable radicalization of Muslim Bengali settlers. We will be making regular visits to the Hill Tracts to monitor human rights and security in what remains a highly volatile region.

BACKGROUND: BEFORE LARGE-SCALE BENGALI MIGRATION

¶2. (SBU) The Chittagong Hill Tracts are starkly different from the rest of Bangladesh. The rest of the country -- except the Sundarban mangrove -- is intensely farmed plains densely populated by ethnic Bengalis, the vast majority of whom are Muslim. The CHT, however, is rugged terrain and sparsely populated, home to more than a dozen tribes whose beliefs range from Buddhist to Hindu to Christian to animist. They cultivate the narrow, fertile valleys as well as the steep hillsides, where they employ the "jhum" slash-and-burn technique of farming. Much of the best land was flooded with the construction of a huge, USAID-financed dam in 1963 near Rangamati city, forcing tens of thousands of people to move to inferior land. At the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, the Hill Tracts population still was overwhelmingly tribal interspersed with Bengalis who had migrated to the region in earlier decades, often to start up small businesses.

13. (SBU) The demographics of the region profoundly changed when impoverished Bengalis inundated the Hill Tracts in the five years ending in 1984 under a government-sponsored resettlement program; estimates of the number of newcomers range from 400,000 on up. The CHT, much of which is not arable, could not support nearly so many people, and the government to this day provides settlers with about 85 kilograms of rice per family per month. Many settlers who initially tried to claim fields to farm met with violent opposition from tribesmen and retreated into "cluster villages" for landless Bengalis, which still exist. The interagency Embassy team visited one of those villages, Rangchari, where 800 Bengali families live in homes built behind bamboo-slat walls and protected by rifle-wielding para-military guards.

14. (SBU) The influx of settlers in the 1970s-80s fueled an indigenous insurgency that continues to this day, though much reduced in scope since a 1997 peace accord between the Government of Bangladesh and the Shanti Bahini, the main insurgency group. In recent years, many Bengali settlers have left their cluster-village homes to claim local land to farm; about 150 families from Rangchari have moved out in the past two years. Indigenous people argue that settlers are grabbing land that is not theirs. A group of 18 headmen and other local dignitaries traveled to Dhaka for a news conference in December 2007 to protest what they described as recent land grabs of nearly 400 acres in 12 villages in the northern Hill Tracts. "I haven't lost land myself, but my neighbors and relatives have," one of the participants, Nayana Devi Chakma,

DHAKA 00000470 002 OF 003

told the Embassy team during a visit to her home in Maischari Union. She claimed that the military was harrassing her since she returned from Dhaka and that she was moving from house to house out of fear of being arrested.

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY, POLICE AND GOVERNMENT

15. (C) The Bangladeshi military is complicit in the land grabs "to quite an extent," said Devasish Roy (protect), king of the Chakma people who comprise the largest tribe in the Hill Tracts (See Reftel). Roy, who also is Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser for the Ministries of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and of Environment and Forests, is a relatively moderate voice but still views the Bengali presence as an occupying force. Indeed, the CHT is by far the most militarized area inside Bangladesh, with about 30,000 soldiers from the army and the Bangladesh Rifles, which is the main border security force. The large force is justified by the military as necessary to suppress the ongoing tribal insurgency; by most accounts, however, the insurgency has dwindled to several hundred people who are primarily engaged in extortion and kidnapping to raise funds. Roy views the continued military presence as a manifestation of a colonial mindset among some Bengalis.

16. (C) Army checkpoints, typically manned by soldiers with vintage rifles and the occasional submachine gun, are set up every few miles along the region's main north-south road between Rangamati and Khagrachhari, along which EmbOffs also saw a foot patrol during their five-day visit. Although the peace accord called for the closure of most army bases in the Hill Tracts, Roy said only a few camps have been shut down as a token gesture. Sprawling cantonments remain near the largest cities with Bengali settlements strategically placed nearby. He said relations between the military and tribal Buddhist monasteries are particularly tense; both are highly regimented and both want to occupy the literal high ground -- the army for tactical reasons and the Buddhists for spiritual ones.

¶7. (C) Signs of discrimination against indigenous people are legion. There are few, if any, tribal people in the 3,000-strong police force of Rangamati District even though Roy said the peace accord explicitly allows for their inclusion. The Superintendent of Police for Rangamati told EmbOffs that recruiting officers from local tribesmen would be helpful for a force that remains largely ignorant of indigenous cultures and language. The top echelons of CHT government also are bereft of tribal people. A meeting between the Embassy team and the Rangamati District Deputy Commissioner and his aides to discuss emergency food relief was essentially an affair free of indigenous people. The Embassy team also heard many tribal people complain that there was not enough work for them on infrastructure projects, particularly road-building by the military where Bengali laborers were said to be favored.

A TICKING TIME BOMB?

¶8. (C) The land grabs, the continued massive military presence, and the systematic discrimination ensure that tribal people remain marginalized. So too does the dramatically changing demographics from the resettlements. While the total population of the Hill Tracts is something of a mystery (the Government has not released any statistics recently), the consensus estimate is about 1.5 million people. Bengalis account for the majority in at least one of the three CHT districts, Khagrachhari. They account for nearly half of the population of Rangamati district, according to the Superintendent of Police there, and for a strong majority in the district capital, where they dominate commerce. Roy believes the indigenous peoples will dwindle to about 30 percent of the total in the Hill Tracts over the next two decades, making it ever more difficult to maintain their distinct identities.

¶9. (C) Relations between Bengalis and the indigenous population "could deteriorate at any time," said Dipankar

DHAKA 00000470 003 OF 003

Talukder, a former Awami League parliamentarian from Rangamati who belongs to a local tribe. (Note: Scores of homes were torched in Sajek Union of northern Rangamati district on April 20. A foreign aid worker who saw the ruins the following day heard a number of differing accounts, including one from a local colleague who said that growing tension over recent land grabs led to Bengali settlers setting fire to homes of indigenous people. End Note.) Talukder believes the northern district of Khagrachhari, home to most of the recent land grabs, is particularly volatile, an assessment borne out by the sharp anti-Bengali comments made by Nayana Devi Chakma's neighbors. One man, as he sat in her house sipping ginger tea and snacking on rice-and-coconut biscuits, recounted how three acres of fertile land of fruit and teak trees was brazenly taken from his father by several Bengali families one night in 2004. It would be best, the neighbors said, if all Bengalis left the Hill Tracts and returned to the plains. While the Embassy team found no evidence that recent land grabs or the food shortages affecting some villages had increased the ranks of local insurgents, their stubborn presence indicates continued frustration among the hill tribes over their second-class status in their own land.

¶10. (C) The Bengali settlers, too, have grievances, particularly those still living in the teeming cluster villages. Roy expects this population will become increasingly radicalized over the following decade. Although the Rangchari cluster village did not appear outwardly extremist -- women did not wear burkhas as is common in many plains villages, for example -- a small, locally funded madrassa appeared to be thriving across the road. The course of study for its 60-some students, about evenly divided

between boys and girls, was primarily Koran memorization.

COMMENT: THE NEED TO REMAIN ENGAGED

¶11. (C) Roy acknowledged some important similarities between the Bengali presence in the CHT and the Han Chinese presence in Tibet. In each case, a distinct people living in a remote area is being overrun by an ethnic group that accounts for the vast majority of the population in the rest of the country. This is happening through civilian migration, a large military presence, and control of the local economy and politics by the dominant group.

¶12. (C) We fear that growing ethnic tension could radicalize ethnic Bengalis and indigenous peoples in the CHT and will only further complicate Bangladesh's difficult transition to democracy. We may be able, however, to influence developments in a positive direction. After an interagency visit to the Hill Tracts in January 2008 (the first in three years), the Embassy urged Dhaka to lift a military restriction on mobile telephony to boost development. Within months, the GOB announced that cell phone coverage would begin in the main CHT towns. The Embassy plans to continue regular visits to the Hill Tracts to stay abreast of current events and better advocate for human rights and development. The Embassy Information Support Team plans a survey of the region to better understand livelihood issues, while USAID may expand its national environment, health and education programs into the Hill Tracts. Only through such multipronged engagement can the U.S. help improve the security and human rights situation in what remains one of the most volatile yet strategically important regions of Bangladesh.

Moriarty